

Institutional Policies and Practices for Admitting, Assessing, and Tracking International Students

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The United States has the largest market share of international students at 22%, followed by the United Kingdom at 11% (Project Atlas, 2015). The U.S. share has decreased from 28% in 2001 although total numbers of international students are increasing (Project Atlas, 2015). Decreased market share may be due to targeted national strategies in other countries to attract international students. These include immigration policies that not only expedite obtaining a student visa, but provide opportunities to work while studying and permanent jobs and residency after graduation (e.g., Canada, the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden) (Lane, 2015). Nations are also actively recruiting, providing databases with comprehensive information about studying in the country, (e.g., the Netherlands), and offering financial incentives (e.g., Germany)(Lane, 2015). In some cases, countries that once sent students to study abroad (United Arab Emirates, Singapore, Malaysia) are now actively recruiting to host students from their regions (Lane, 2015).

An important distinction in comparing the United States with other host countries is that only 4.8% of the total U.S. higher education enrollment is comprised of international students (Institute of International Research, 2015; Project Atlas, 2015) in contrast with approximately 22% in the United Kingdom and 21% in Australia. This has significant implications for institutional practice in terms of English proficiency levels in particular. If international students represent only 1-2% of enrollments at an institution, for instance, the needs of these students can go largely unnoticed. Even in these situations, however, some programs of study may attract significant numbers of English language learners in which cases additional resources and strategies may be implemented.

The overall percentage of students in U.S. higher education institutions may explain, in part, why the Department of Education or regional accrediting bodies do not provide centralized guidance for international student support. In contrast, Australia has addressed the needs of its large percentage of international students who speak English as an Additional Language by implementing 10 Good Practice Principles (Australian Universities Quality Agency, 2009). These include adequate resourcing for English language development, ensuring students' competency for study, determining appropriate entry requirements, understanding the need for well-developed communication skills at the time of graduation, advising students of their responsibility for proficiency improvement, embedding linguistic development into the curriculum, diagnosing needs early, supporting sociocultural adjustment, enhancing linguistic development through social interaction, and monitoring improvement. In all cases, whether guidelines are established or not, strategies need to be context-specific and may vary within institutions.

Prospective international students indicate that their primary motivation for studying abroad is to learn to speak English fluently followed by achieving a degree, obtaining a satisfying job, living in another country, and making a difference in the world (ICEF Monitor, 2016). Are U.S. institutions of higher education enabling students to achieve their top goal? Are they collecting sufficient data to make this determination? A series of national studies addressed these and related questions (Andrade, Evans, & Hartshorn, 2014, 2015, 2016). The first study included a survey of staff directly responsible for international students, such as admissions officers, international student center directors, and ESL program directors, at the top hosting institutions in the U.S. Questions focused on institutional policies and practices for admitting, assessing, and tracking international students.

Findings indicated the following:

- Institutions determine if prospective students are native or non-native English speakers based on country of origin and citizenship (e.g., if they are from countries where English is predominantly spoken or which has English as an official language, the applicant is considered to be a native English speaker and is excused from admissions testing).
- Students are admitted on a single standardized proficiency test. Few institutions require additional post-admissions testing such as further examination of writing or speaking skills, diagnostic testing, or as a best practice (e.g., using multiple measures). When testing

occurs, writing skills assessment is the most common, particularly at the undergraduate level.

- Undergraduate students are more likely than graduate students to be required to further their English language skills. The most common method for doing so is coursework.
- Courses, skill centers, and tutoring are the most common means of support with courses generally being required and the other two types of support being optional.
- No institutions track English language learners' proficiency development; about half track grade point averages, 40% track retention, and 30% monitor graduation rates; this lack of tracking is primarily due to it not being required or to not having the resources to do so.
- Participants had a range of perspectives about their policies and practices with some having full confidence in their admission processes and others recognizing that test scores do not always demonstrate actual ability or that they were making subjective assumptions about student success.

A follow-up study of these same institutions, but which solicited input from chief academic officers regarding the importance of international students to their strategic planning and the likelihood of adopting practices different from those established resulted in the following conclusions.

- International students are critical to institutional strategic planning; institutions are committed to supporting the development of students' academic English skills.
- Faculty/staff tend to lack of knowledge of language acquisition factors (e.g., general v. academic English) as well as the need for continued skill development.
- International students who speak English as an additional language perform as well academically as native English speakers, yet faculty are likely not satisfied with students' skill levels.
- Existing support focuses primarily on developing students' general academic English skills rather than on discipline-specific needs or preparing students with the linguistic skills needed for future professions.
- Strategies beyond improving students' English language skills in ways other than required ESL coursework and optional tutoring or learning center attendance are generally not under consideration.
- Institutions are most interested in conducting a needs analysis or changing testing approaches as opposed to additional tracking of

learning outcomes, discipline-based approaches for English development, faculty training, or senior year English assessments.

- Lack of resources and time to graduation, as opposed to faculty and student resistance, are perceived as the most significant barriers to implementing additional opportunities for English language development.

These studies establish that the institutions hosting the most international students in the U.S. follow fairly standard and consistent practices, which, for the most part, are quite practical. However, institutional decision-makers have not given much consideration to alternative ways of assessing and developing students' English language skills in spite of a strong commitment to this and an acknowledgement that students' skills could be better.

One way of framing the discussion of English language proficiency in order to change current paradigms is to shift the focus from an emphasis on support to a focus on English language development (Arkoudis, Baik, & Richardson, 2012). Support implies simply helping students get through their degree requirements while development acknowledges a commitment to assisting students in achieving higher level skills and preparing them for future contexts in which they will use English. Given the variations in institutions, as indicated earlier, the framework in Figure 1 could serve as a guide to the development of institution-specific approaches.

Institutions must first determine stakeholder views and beliefs about the role of English language learning, how it develops, and expectations for levels of proficiency. They can then determine and develop pedagogical approaches most beneficial in helping students further develop their skills. They need to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of various approaches – for example, how would a collaborative model in which faculty partner with TESOL professionals to develop a discipline-based approach to proficiency development work as opposed to required generic stand-alone ESL course work or optional tutoring? Which model best supports learners and furthers their skills? What are the financial and human resource issues and what are the implications for organizational structure or policy? Are some approaches more appropriate than others in a given situation (e.g., many English learners in a major v. very few)? The same is true of the various assessment points in the Table. How feasible are they which have the most benefits? How can an institution measure success in terms of advancing students' English proficiency? Should additional assessment points be identified or post-graduation information be collected from employers?

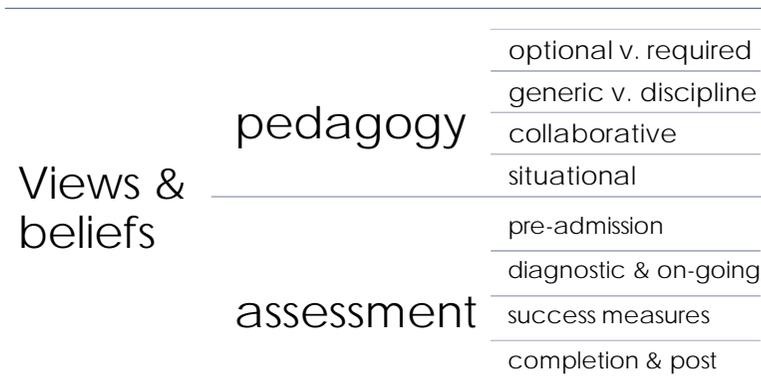


Figure 1. Framework for English language development (adapted from Andrade et al. 2014, 2016).

U.S. institutions of higher education have enormous potential to develop models for furthering students’ English language skills post-admission so that these learners can achieve their top goal for studying in an English-speaking country—fluent use of the language. Opportunities exist for innovations that will set institutions apart from their competitors in terms of their approach to English language development. This involves campus-wide discussions and reflection of these results in institutional strategic plans. The proposed framework can serve as a guide.

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